

Northwest Louisiana Health Care Summit

Report to Governor Kathleen Blanco

**February 17, 2004
Shreveport, La.**

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About this Report

Three discussion groups, one public forum and additional independent submissions from private citizens and health practitioners yielded a consistent list of issues regarding health care in Northwest Louisiana. The personal stories are compelling; reports of professional frustrations equally so. The result is a snapshot of health care concerns in Northwest Louisiana indicating general consensus about the need for reform and suggestions about where to start.

This report is an attempt to incorporate the results of Northwest Louisiana's recent health care discussions designed to gather input for Governor Blanco's health care summit and the subsequent reform process. While every effort has been made to solicit input from the community in the short period of time allowed for preparation of the report, this document should be considered merely a starting point for further discussion. This document highlights only the issues cited with the greatest frequency in regional health care discussions. They are thus considered to be of the highest priority.

Source materials contributing to the content of this report are included in the appendices. The appendices include a record of discussions from separate breakout groups with medical professionals and service providers and these narrative records include a listing of all issues raised. The appendices also include public comment cards submitted at a recent forum and the independent submissions of medical professionals, service providers and private citizens who wanted to ensure that their particular concerns were accurately conveyed through the process.

The Health Care Policy Context

There is broad agreement in Northwest Louisiana about the state of health care in the region. Any mention of the subject results in discussion of the high quality of resources and professional expertise available locally. But such discussion also inevitably leads to expressions of concern about large numbers of uninsured, impeded access to primary and preventive health care services, ineffective communication with the community about the availability of existing resources, and an acute awareness of the hurdles posed by the social and policy environments within which the health care system exists.

The specific health care concerns of this region are detailed in the following sections. But first, it is necessary to identify some of the ancillary issues impacting the health care environment. These are variables contributing to the context within which health care policy is implemented, but not necessarily related to health policy per se. These are concerns that appeared again and again in the course of discussion.

Many issues directly impacting the delivery of health care in NWLA may appear to have little to do with health care itself. But it is a symptom of the complexity of the state's health care challenges that remedying the current situation will require addressing many other issues at the same time. Among the systemic problems cited:

Health care is not a state budget priority

The state's failure to protect health care funding in the budgetary process shortchanges Louisiana on an issue where it is already behind.

High poverty rates impact health statistics

The state's high poverty rates impact the financial priority consumers can afford to place on health care for the short-term. This tradeoff comes with long-term health consequences.

Slow economic development results in lack of opportunities

The state's stalled economic development efforts have not yielded employment opportunities. New jobs offering health benefits are limited. For many state residents, such benefits are inaccessible.

Weaknesses in the education system hurt the population

Functional illiteracy impedes the ability of much of the state's population to follow-up on the medical care it does receive and to understand printed material explaining the availability of health care resources.

Public transportation in need of improvement

Public transportation does not adequately serve residents of the inner city and rural areas. Without access to reliable and convenient transportation, patients are likely to miss appointments or to delay health care altogether until a crisis arises. This is particularly true in rural areas where gaps in public transportation impede access to primary care.

Bureaucratic hurdles (state & federal)

Regulations and onerous paperwork requirements that accompany state or federal funding take staff time and resources away from direct patient care.

The aforementioned variables are noted here to demonstrate an awareness of the complexity of the problems at hand and to emphasize the fact that NWLA recognizes reform of the state's health care policies cannot be undertaken in policy vacuum. In order to succeed, they must be addressed in tandem with other, not unrelated issues.

Strengths of Health Care in Northwest Louisiana

Northwest Louisiana has numerous strengths on the health care front. The industry is a strong regional economic driver and the opportunities for research, education and the actual delivery of health care are manifold.

The following points are consistently given high priority in discussion of the region's strengths:

- Health care is the region's leading industry;
- Regional centers support a populace within a 120- to 200-mile radius;
- Broad range of specialty coverage provided by LSU-HSC, Willis Knighton and Christus Schumpert (no need to travel elsewhere for care);
- LSU-HSC's designation as a Level I Trauma Center is a vital part of the regional health care picture but diminishes in proportion to distance from Shreveport-Bossier metropolitan area;
- Opportunities exist for medical education and research (i.e. the medical school at LSU-HSC, NSU's nursing school and the Biomedical Research Foundation);
- Cooperative (private-public) relationships between private medical centers and LSU-HSC provide services that would not otherwise be available (i.e. transplant centers);
- Local clinics provide free medical exams and dental care to underserved populations;
- Two school-based clinics achieve positive results and can serve as models for similar endeavors elsewhere in the community and the state;
- LSU-HSC best-practices used as a model for other state charity hospitals

There is a strong foundation on which to build regarding health care in Northwest Louisiana, but the many challenges facing the region on health care issues are grave. They are outlined next.

Gaps in Northwest Louisiana's Health Care Picture

Even with the region's impressive strengths, there are serious health care challenges facing Northwest Louisiana. The problems considered most significant in recent discussions are:

- Large numbers of uninsured and underinsured;
- Insufficient preventative health care opportunities;
- Low Medicaid reimbursement rates as disincentive to providers;
- Lack of comprehensive care for high-needs children;
- Inadequate long-term mental health care options;
- Ineffective communication of health care information to the population;
- Shortage of workers due to difficulties with recruitment and retention, with less-than-competitive wages impacting medical and nursing faculty;
- Limited access to primary care in rural areas, with lack of transportation a barrier to treatment and services in larger communities;
- Too much emergency room and episodic care;
- Insufficient monitoring of chronic conditions;
- Unaffordable pharmaceuticals

Problem-solving for Northwest Louisiana's Health Care Concerns

Identifying problems is only the first step in the process. Proposing solutions is the next, more difficult task.

Solutions to the health care challenges outlined here include, first, the request that the state address the shortcomings in policies and services that exacerbate already difficult health care conditions.

Recommendations for addressing the overall policy context include:

- Take steps to protect health care spending in the state budget as a dedicated "line item" in the budget not subject to reductions;
- Develop effective policies to address the state's high poverty rates, especially among children;
- Promote economic development efforts designed to create stable, long-term, full-benefit jobs in the state;
- Continue policies requiring educational reform and accountability;
- Study the efficacy of public transportation and providing incentives for improved service and access;
- Make an effort to reduce the bureaucratic burden accompanying state (and where applicable, federal) funding

Recommendations addressing the most critical regional gaps include:

- Improve Medicaid reimbursement for all services and providers by reevaluating the use of current funds;
- Establish parity in Medicaid, private insurance, indigent program, etc. (Massachusetts has a working model to consider);
- Improve coordination of services through professional networks, email lists, database creation, etc. (could model on CUBS network for NICU at LSU-HSC);
- Create a sustainable continuum of care for mental health services, including local options for long-term residential care;
- Reduce overhead spending at DHH through a mandated shift in the percentage of budget allocated to administration relative to spending on services;
- Promote creation of regional “community health institutes” to help ensure effective use of resources, facilitate communication, and change emphasis from “crisis care” to “preventive care”;
- Maximize federal matching dollars and make sure such monies are not “left on the table” through lack of state match;
- Eliminate forced rotation among contract providers (allow health care professionals to choose the most effective services for their patients);
- Expand school-based clinics and related educational services;
- Attend to LSU-HSC funding needs to keep medical school strong through competitive pay for faculty.

Conclusions

Although the lists of concerns outlined here (and in the appendices) are long, the solutions proposed by those who participated in regional discussions demonstrate a willingness to change the system as it exists today.

Medical professionals and the general public are committed to the process of transforming the state’s struggling health care environment into a system that meets the needs of the population it is intended to serve. There can be no doubt that support for health care reform.